

Half a century of Shipping Spills. What's Changed?



Richard H. Johnson

Technical Director

The International Tanker Owners Pollution Federation Limited (ITOPF)

1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road, London EC1Y 1HQ, United Kingdom

Over the last half century, particularly since the critical TORREY CANYON incident of 1967, the most noteworthy change has been the dramatic decline in the number of major tanker spills from an annual average of 24.5 in the 1970's to 3.3 in the 2000's, despite the growing size of the world fleet. This is due, in no small measure, to the endeavours of maritime states through the IMO as well as both the shipping and oil industries, whose cooperation have made such incidents rare rather than a common twice monthly event. Development and implementation of international conventions that set the standards for ship design and operations, have worked to mitigate the occurrence of incidents, where as conventions offering guidance on preparing for incidents and promoting government-industry cooperation, as well as ensuring the availability of compensation to victims of oils spills have acted to minimise the consequences should an incident occur, all of which have seen widespread adoption globally.

Significant advances in the understanding of the fate and behaviour of oil spills have aided the development of specialised response equipment and techniques that

are continuously improving through coordination of R&D activities with first hand response experience on site.

An increased perceived understanding of both the environmental and economic impact of an oil spill or spill of cargo other than oil has increased both the public's intolerance of such events regardless of size and the media interest in them. Consequently response services, such as those provided by ITOPF, are being sought for increasingly smaller yet more costly and complex spills typically from non-tankers. Following an incident greater consideration is more frequently now given to post spill environmental monitoring and damage assessment. There is increased focus on the carriage of hazardous and noxious substances (HNS) as awareness of the potential impact of such spills is also rising globally.

The quantity and quality of spill response training and education programs undertaken, in addition to publications such as response manuals, guidelines and scientific papers, have helped to better educate all manner of interested individuals, including government officials of all levels, industry, the scientific community and general public. Contingency planning is now a well known phrase associated with spill response, and it is now common for such plans to be developed for ships, installations, ports, countries and regions. Furthermore these plans are becoming much more comprehensive and are being adapted to reflect the changing risk profiles associated with changing trade patterns, and may also include a much wider range of issues such as wildlife response. All of this has led spill response to progress from a situation of localised chaos, to a global community of experienced and well informed individuals on hand to provide assistance anywhere in the world, supported by a wealth of literature and scientific research.

Obviously there is more progress to be made. Levels of preparedness are by no means uniform and remain less than ideal in many parts of the world. Many governments pass arguably too much responsibility to the private sector during an incident, and in doing so can often deplete their own capacity to effectively and proficiently address the interests of the people they represent when need arises. The increasing desire for continual news feed and updates on spill events and their response, is a challenge responders and authorities are trying to address without deterring from their primary role.

Despite the R&D work undertaken and the knowledge gained in the last 50 years, in some areas, techniques such as the use of dispersants in particular continue to be shrouded in suspicion and uncertainty by many. Therefore, more can be done to promote and make accessible to all who need it, the knowledge gained and lessons learned.

The increasing size of vessels and the growing presence of ships in remote locations or in extreme environments present new challenges. Therefore further progress is necessary in adapting and developing the knowledge and skills acquired over the last 50 years to address both existing weaknesses and developing issues, in order to continue this declining trend and minimise the risk of major tanker spills in the future.